

Gavock could do, it seemed, was to pay for the portrait and let him go.

"I'll take the picture, of course—delighted to get it!" he said heartily. "But I know you don't want to sell it. Why not let me help you—just over this illness—a loan—"

But Andrus cut him off with an abrupt refusal.

"As you like, then," Gavock agreed. "What is the price?"

"Five hundred will see me through—or out," Andrus said dully.

Gavock winced at the stolid coldness of the reply. "The picture's worth more," he began; but again Andrus interrupted. "That's all I'm asking," he said in a tone that closed the argument.

Accordingly Gavock counted out for him half the contents of the envelop containing the money he had got for Miss Lowther.

"Good God, man!" he broke out. "I can't let you go off like this, not knowing where you're going. You're ill, I can see it. You can hardly stand! Wherever you're going, I'm going with you," he finished with sudden determination.

Andrus threw up his head with a frightened protest. "No, no—I don't want you—I mean, I'm all right. I have friends—I'm going to them—there's nothing you can do. Now I have the money, I'll be all right."

Gavock frowned in uncertainty. Andrus' distress at his solicitude was plainly genuine. That the poor devil wanted to be alone in his misery was obvious. And he was not the sort you could force yourself upon, even for his own good. Besides, now that he was roused he seemed stronger than he had appeared before. Still, he looked ill—dreadfully ill. Something—anything—might happen before he reached his friends.

"I'm all right, Mr. Gavock—I know just what I have to do—my head's all right, and I'll take a cab home—I'll be all right," he insisted.

"Yes, take a cab," Gavock urged, catching at the idea as a sort of compromise. "Take a motorcab. Get home as fast as you can. And get a doctor!"

His companion assented with a nod; but he remained motionless, his eyes fastened on the portrait.

"And you can feel at ease about—that you asked," Gavock added as the other's request recurred to him. "I shall not mention our meeting."

"Thank you," Andrus murmured absently without moving.

For a while there was silence between them. Andrus appeared to be lost in thought, unconscious of his surroundings. Gavock watched him curiously. The human drama—too often a tragedy—never failed to hold his interest, and this variation of it had not come to his attention before. What was the man thinking of? Shattered ambitions, vanished dreams, what not?

Abruptly Gavock's speculations linked themselves with the questions that had shortly before clamored for utterance. He was letting a chance go by, perhaps forever, to solve a problem that was likely to prove more than a passing disturbance in his intercourse with Guy Amarinth. The boy had not been satisfied by his assurance—given in all sincerity—that he had been mistaken in fancying that he and Miss Dupont had met in Europe; that had been evident from his manner. His manner too had revealed the depth of his infatuation for the girl. Gavock felt sure that the incident of his afternoon encounter with Miss Dupont was not closed between himself and Guy. The youth would be coming with questions that Gavock—as he now acutely realized—would not in the least know how to answer.

THEN Gavock asked, gazing at the canvas: "Did you know her well, Andrus?" "What is your theory about her death?"

Andrus turned his head and stared. "Theory?" he echoed. "What do you mean? She was murdered."

"That wasn't proved, was it? The man got off."

"He was guilty!"

The words were uttered with a calm

finality that made Gavock hesitate again before continuing. "I was not in Paris at the time of the trial. I followed it from the newspaper accounts, and some of those I missed; but I gathered that the evidence was all circumstantial, that there was reasonable doubt of the man's guilt."

"No one who knew him doubted it."

"But weren't there witnesses who testified that they saw her afterward—alive?"

"Her dead body answered those lies."

"Lies! You think they were just lies?"

"What else could they have been? The body was there—she was dead."

But Gavock persisted. "There was doubt that it was hers, I thought. The head was—"

Andrus cut off the sentence with an exclamation of distress. His face was distorted a moment; then he mastered his discomposure and said evenly: "The trial was a farce, Mr. Gavock. There was meddling from high places. Lies were sworn to and the truth suppressed. All they wanted was to keep out any mention of—the necklace and the man who owned it."

"The Rumanian Prince?"

"Yes."

Gavock waited, hoping further information would come unsought. He had heard that it was the mad pursuit of the dancer by the young nobleman that had led to her death at the hands of a humbler lover; though a less conspicuous admirer was made to figure publicly as the object of jealousy: an easy matter in the case of a girl of unknown origin and history, even the beginnings of her meteoric career veiled and obscure.

But it was evident that he did not wish to continue the conversation, and in the face of his disinclination Gavock found it hard to push his inquiry. His reluctance, however, yielded to the reflection that if he didn't get from Andrus the absolute certainty of Alix Floria's death, he was not likely to get it at all. He pressed on to this purpose by suddenly avowing it frankly.

I WISH you'd tell me, Andrus, why you are so sure that the body found in Floria's rooms was hers. The reason I ask is that I have since seen a woman who so resembled her that I thought it was actually she."

Andrus had reached the door and opened it. "She was not an unusual type," he said. "And you didn't really know her, did you?"

"I saw her several times and observed her closely. And this girl I speak of was about the age she would have been. I shouldn't have given it a thought if I hadn't remembered that there were people who said they saw Floria alive after the body was found in her rooms. What I want to know is how you can be so sure about the body, considering that the head—"

"Her maid identified it," Andrus interrupted.

"That's what you go on, then?"

"That and the clothes. Isn't it enough?"

"It wasn't enough to convince the jury. It was the doubt of that which led them to bring a verdict of acquittal, as I remember. I hate to press you, Andrus, but the truth is that this woman I speak of is engaged to marry a friend of mine, and—well, you understand. If you have any other proof that the body was Floria's, I should take it as a personal favor if you would tell me what it is."

"I have the proof of my own eyes."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I saw the body."

"Oh, you were familiar with it, then?"

She had posed for you—for the figure?"

"Yes."

As he spoke Andrus' gray, drawn skin reddened to the rim of his blond hair. "Don't misunderstand me," he said sharply. "She was not a model—for anyone else. She was my wife."

With that he pulled the door shut behind him, and Gavock was left to stare his astonishment at space.

The thing he had just heard seemed incredible. No hint of the marriage had ever reached him. It must have been a secret one, and Andrus had told it now

only to protect from a slurring thought the name of the woman he had loved.

Well, at any rate, Gavock had gained what he had sought. The identification of Floria's body by one who had known every line and curve of it as only an artist's trained eye could know them was to his mind conclusive. And it was proof that Alix Floria was dead.

CHAPTER XIII

I'LL see you at once, Amarinth. Will you go in, please?" Hugh Senior waved toward the inner room, and Guy obeyed the gesture silently.

When the door was closed Guy told him of his conversation and that the necklace had been claimed.

A taxicab conveyed them to Rice & Lozier's with its best speed. The anxious face of Lozier loomed at the door.

"This is Mr. Senior, from whom I had the necklace," Guy said to the jeweler as they entered.

Lozier bowed. He would have offered profuse apologies for his indiscretion in displaying the ornament; but Hugh interrupted with a question:

"Where are these men?"

"They are in my office," was the answer.

"And where is the necklace?"

"In a case at the back there, being watched. We are taking no chances with it, I assure you."

The strangers were found seated at a table in a tastefully furnished private office. The jeweler introduced the Americans to the Rumanian Consul, who in turn presented his compatriot as Count Egon Szemere of Bukharest.

"Which of you gentlemen claims to be the owner of the necklace?" the Consul asked, directly formalities were over.

"Neither of us," Hugh answered. "Mr. Amarinth brought the jewels here to be appraised at my request; but neither he nor I claim to own them. As you, however, have entered such a claim, I suppose I may infer that you are prepared to prove it?"

"We are. And we are also prepared to take such legal steps as may be necessary to regain possession."

The Consul's manner was brusque, almost offensive. But his companion interposed courteously:

"I am sure, my dear Consul, that we have only to prove our claim to these gentlemen to make further action unnecessary."

"Thank you," said Hugh, inclining his head slightly; whereupon Count Szemere responded with a ceremonious bow.

The two then measured each other briefly but sharply, and the conclusion of each was that the other was to be trusted.

"You will oblige me, my dear Consul, by presenting your credentials," Count Szemere said, and the Consul, thus reduced to a subordinate rôle, dug into a pocket for the required papers.

Hugh Senior looked them through, and restored them with a nod of acceptance.

"My passport," said the Count, offering another paper.

"Your word is sufficient, Count Szemere," Hugh returned with a movement of polite refusal.

The Count bowed again deeply. "Then may I hope that your wishes will meet mine when I suggest that we dispense with legal formality in the exchange of—shall I say information? The matter is one of extreme delicacy, and a discussion between gentlemen befits it better than process of law. I will ask the Consul to withdraw if you will make a similar request of Mr.—" He glanced at Lozier, whose name he had apparently not learned.

"Mr. Lozier will oblige us, I'm sure," Hugh said, adding as the Count's glance moved on to Guy: "Mr. Amarinth is as closely concerned in the affair as I am. Suppose we three adjourn to my office and talk things over there? We can take the necklace or leave it, as you prefer."

"Which do you prefer?" Count Egon inquired.

"I think Mr. Lozier's vault is the best

place for it. Your interests are safeguarded by the fact that the Consul has entered a formal claim and Mr. Lozier can't surrender it without a release from him. By the way, Mr. Lozier, did your expert look the thing over?"

"Not in detail, Mr. Senior, owing to the circumstances that have arisen; but he pronounces it without doubt a genuine antique of great intrinsic value."

When they were seated in the privacy of Hugh's office, Count Szemere was the first to speak.

"Since neither of you gentlemen claims to own the necklace, is it permitted to inquire for whom you are acting?"

"Only for ourselves," Hugh replied. "The necklace came into my possession some years ago through an accident, and I have kept it, not knowing its value. I shall willingly surrender it to you the minute I am convinced of your right to it."

"I claim no personal right: I act for another," said the Count.

Szemere's black eyes gleamed with expectancy as they darted from one to the other of his companions. His former ceremonious demeanor had dropped from him like a shell; he leaned forward eagerly, and in the stillness one heard him breathe. Suddenly he spoke again, looking at Hugh:

"You have also the cross?"

"The cross?"

"To the necklace a cross was attached. It has been broken off—that sees itself."

"Yes, I noticed that the necklace seemed to have had a pendant; but it had none when it came into my possession. It was a cross, you say?"

"A cross of the Rumanian church—a Greek cross, you would call it. It was very valuable, as valuable of itself as the necklace entire."

"I never saw it."

"But you will tell me where, when, and how the necklace came to you?"

"I cannot promise that," Hugh answered. "I have said that when I am convinced that you have a right to the necklace I will give it to you. It is for you to prove that right."

"But you give me only the necklace!" Count Szemere made a gesture of tragic despair. "The cross—where is that? Surely you will help me that I find it!"

Hugh thought a moment. "I will do what I can," he said. "If when I have heard your story I feel that I have information that will be of service to you, you shall have it—that is, with Mr. Amarinth's consent. He is, as I have said before, as closely concerned in this matter as I."

The Count turned his keen glance on Amarinth, and the latter reddened under it. At the telltale flush the Rumanian cried out, "Ah, your secret concerns a lady!"

"Yes," Hugh replied after brief hesitation.

"And your young friend is her lover! Yes, yes. Do not blush for it. I understand—I too love." He sprang up and held out his hand to Guy. "Come, let us join hands as men of honor and as lovers. I help you, perhaps, and you help me. You are not happy—that sees itself. You are troubled—I do not ask why. Well, I too am unhappy. Attend! For six years and more I have not looked upon the face of my beloved. In this your country I am an exile, serving my country far from all I love, as punishment—punishment because that the loss of the jewels of Kemesvar was put to my fault." He had seized Guy's hand, yielded awkwardly, and now he continued, "Come, is it agreed?"

"We can promise you nothing, Count Szemere," Hugh interposed. "When we have heard your story we shall do what we can to aid you."

Count Szemere bowed low to Hugh. "You are right. I honor you that thus you guard a woman's secret. The secret I guard touches my own honor and that of a noble house. Behold, I trust you! I now speak to you everything, without reserve!"

To be continued next week.